

A DISCOURSE UPON THE
ORIGIN AND FOUNDATION OF
THE INEQUALITY AMONG
MANKIND
JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU

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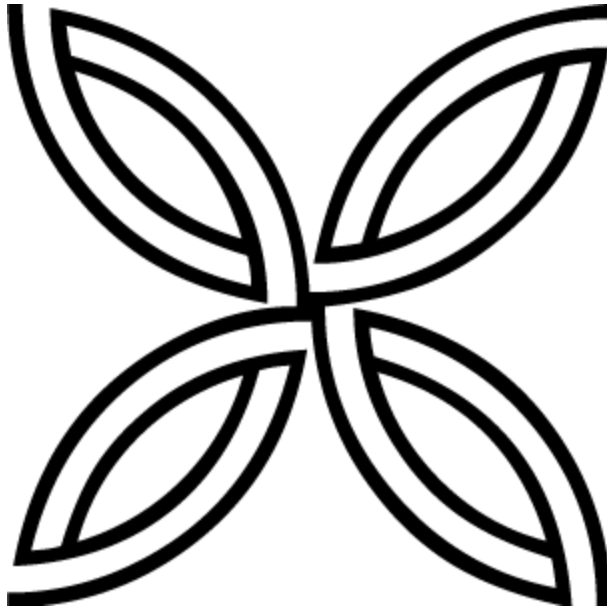
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A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind

Jean Jacques Rousseau



INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Jean Jacques Rousseau was born at Geneva, June 28, 1712, the son of a watchmaker of French origin. His education was irregular, and though he tried many professions—including engraving, music, and teaching—he found it difficult to support himself in any of them. The discovery of his talent as a writer came with the winning of a prize offered by the Academy of Dijon for a discourse on the question, "Whether the progress of the sciences and of letters has tended to corrupt or to elevate morals." He argued so brilliantly that the tendency of civilization was degrading that he became at once famous. The discourse here printed on the causes of inequality among men was written in a similar competition.

He now concentrated his powers upon literature, producing two novels, "La Nouvelle Heloise," the forerunner and parent of endless sentimental and picturesque fictions; and "Emile, ou l'Education," a work which has had enormous influence on the theory and practise of pedagogy down to our own time and in which the Savoyard Vicar appears, who is used as the mouthpiece for Rousseau's own religious ideas. "Le Contrat Social" (1762) elaborated the doctrine of the discourse on inequality. Both historically and philosophically it is unsound; but it was the chief literary source of the enthusiasm for liberty, fraternity, and equality, which inspired the leaders of the French Revolution, and its effects passed far beyond France.

His most famous work, the "Confessions," was published after his death. This book is a mine of information as to his life, but it is far from trustworthy; and the picture it gives of the author's personality and conduct, though painted in such a way as to make it absorbingly interesting, is often unpleasing in the highest degree. But it is one of the great

autobiographies of the world.

During Rousseau's later years he was the victim of the delusion of persecution; and although he was protected by a succession of good friends, he came to distrust and quarrel with each in turn. He died at Ermenonville, near Paris, July 2, 1778, the most widely influential French writer of his age.

The Savoyard Vicar and his "Profession of Faith" are introduced into "Emile" not, according to the author, because he wishes to exhibit his principles as those which should be taught, but to give an example of the way in which religious matters should be discussed with the young. Nevertheless, it is universally recognized that these opinions are Rousseau's own, and represent in short form his characteristic attitude toward religious belief. The Vicar himself is believed to combine the traits of two Savoyard priests whom Rousseau knew in his youth. The more important was the Abbe Gaime, whom he had known at Turin; the other, the Abbe Gatier, who had taught him at Annecy.

QUESTION PROPOSED BY THE ACADEMY OF DIJON

What is the Origin of the Inequality among Mankind; and whether such Inequality is authorized by the Law of Nature?

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'Tis of man I am to speak; and the very question, in answer

to which I am to speak of him, sufficiently informs me that I am going to speak to men; for to those alone, who are not afraid of honouring truth, it belongs to propose discussions of this kind. I shall therefore maintain with confidence the cause of mankind before the sages, who invite me to stand up in its defence; and I shall think myself happy, if I can but behave in a manner not unworthy of my subject and of my judges.

I conceive two species of inequality among men; one which I call natural, or physical inequality, because it is established by nature, and consists in the difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind, or of the soul; the other which may be termed moral, or political inequality, because it depends on a kind of convention, and is established, or at least authorized, by the common consent of mankind. This species of inequality consists in the different privileges, which some men enjoy, to the prejudice of others, such as that of being richer, more honoured, more powerful, and even that of exacting obedience from them.

It were absurd to ask, what is the cause of natural inequality, seeing the bare definition of natural inequality answers the question: it would be more absurd still to enquire, if there might not be some essential connection between the two species of inequality, as it would be asking, in other words, if those who command are necessarily better men than those who obey; and if strength of body or of mind, wisdom or virtue are always to be found in individuals, in the same proportion with power, or riches: a question, fit perhaps to be discussed by slaves in the hearing of their masters, but unbecoming free and reasonable beings in quest of truth.

What therefore is precisely the subject of this discourse? It is to point out, in the progress of things, that moment, when, right taking place of violence, nature became subject to law; to display that chain of surprising events, in

consequence of which the strong submitted to serve the weak, and the people to purchase imaginary ease, at the expense of real happiness.

The philosophers, who have examined the foundations of society, have, every one of them, perceived the necessity of tracing it back to a state of nature, but not one of them has ever arrived there. Some of them have not scrupled to attribute to man in that state the ideas of justice and injustice, without troubling their heads to prove, that he really must have had such ideas, or even that such ideas were useful to him: others have spoken of the natural right of every man to keep what belongs to him, without letting us know what they meant by the word belong; others, without further ceremony ascribing to the strongest an authority over the weakest, have immediately struck out government, without thinking of the time requisite for men to form any notion of the things signified by the words authority and government. All of them, in fine, constantly harping on wants, avidity, oppression, desires and pride, have transferred to the state of nature ideas picked up in the bosom of society. In speaking of savages they described citizens. Nay, few of our own writers seem to have so much as doubted, that a state of nature did once actually exit; though it plainly appears by Sacred History, that even the first man, immediately furnished as he was by God himself with both instructions and precepts, never lived in that state, and that, if we give to the books of Moses that credit which every Christian philosopher ought to give to them, we must deny that, even before the deluge, such a state ever existed among men, unless they fell into it by some extraordinary event: a paradox very difficult to maintain, and altogether impossible to prove.

Let us begin therefore, by laying aside facts, for they do not affect the question. The researches, in which we may engage on this occasion, are not to be taken for historical truths, but merely as hypothetical and conditional

reasonings, fitter to illustrate the nature of things, than to show their true origin, like those systems, which our naturalists daily make of the formation of the world.

Religion commands us to believe, that men, having been drawn by God himself out of a state of nature, are unequal, because it is his pleasure they should be so; but religion does not forbid us to draw conjectures solely from the nature of man, considered in itself, and from that of the beings which surround him, concerning the fate of mankind, had they been left to themselves. This is then the question I am to answer, the question I propose to examine in the present discourse. As mankind in general have an interest in my subject, I shall endeavour to use a language suitable to all nations; or rather, forgetting the circumstances of time and place in order to think of nothing but the men I speak to, I shall suppose myself in the Lyceum of Athens, repeating the lessons of my masters before the Platos and the Xenocrates of that famous seat of philosophy as my judges, and in presence of the whole human species as my audience.

O man, whatever country you may belong to, whatever your opinions may be, attend to my words; you shall hear your history such as I think I have read it, not in books composed by those like you, for they are liars, but in the book of nature which never lies. All that I shall repeat after her, must be true, without any intermixture of falsehood, but where I may happen, without intending it, to introduce my own conceits. The times I am going to speak of are very remote. How much you are changed from what you once were! 'Tis in a manner the life of your species that I am going to write, from the qualities which you have received, and which your education and your habits could deprave, but could not destroy. There is, I am sensible, an age at which every individual of you would choose to stop; and you will look out for the age at which, had you your wish, your species had stopped. Uneasy at your present condition